Interview with Dennis Noah, hospital corpsman assigned to 3rd Platoon, Hotel Company, and Battalion Aid Station, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, 22 September 2005.

I'd like to start at the beginning. Where are you from?
St. Louis, Missouri.

Did you go to school there?
Yes. I went to Catholic grade school and Catholic high school.

At what point did you decide to join the Navy?
It's kind of a funny story. My father had a GED and was really big on education for his kids. It was kind of naturally expected. I graduated from high school in '65 and it was kind of expected that we would go to college. So I went to college and was actually going to do pre-med. I got through my first semester of junior college kind of okay. I got into my second semester and realized that I was not going anywhere. For the midterm exams, I just wrote my name on the exam, handed it back in, and went to the recruiter's office. This was in September of '65.

I talked to the recruiter. I wanted to go into the medical field because I knew about corpsmen. So I told him I wanted to go in as a corpsman in the guaranteed program. He looked at me and said, "Son, let me tell you something. Twenty-five percent of all Navy corpsmen are right now on the ground in Vietnam with the Marine Corps."

"That's fine. That's what I want to do."

So I joined. There was a 2-month delay or something like that. Sunday night I was having dinner with my parents and said, "Oh, by the way, I'm leaving tomorrow."

They said, "Where are you going?"

I said, "I'm going service."

They said, "Okay."

And that's how I ended up in the service. I just wasn't ready for college. When my father was alive, he used to say there was a Noah in every war since the Revolution. So it was just part of the family culture where you went in service.

Had your dad been in the service?
Oh, yeah. He had been in service pre-Pearl Harbor. He was a staff sergeant in the Army and was in the Pacific the whole time. He was in charge of a mortar platoon. He was in New Guinea, the Philippines. It was just part of the family culture. I was the first one in my entire extended family that went beyond high school. My brother got a Ph.D. in astrophysics.

So that's how I ended up in the service. I knew I was going to be drafted. I had a college deferment, which I dropped. So I said, I'll just control this and went in.

That was in '65?
I actually joined in '65 and went in in March of '66.

Where did you go to boot camp?

I went to boot camp at Great Lakes. I went to A school at Great Lakes, then spent almost 6 months in the dispensary and was on the shot team. I used to give the bicillin shots. It was a double heavy dose of penicillin. And we used to give the gamma globulin shots for hepatitis. We gave three or four thousand shots a day.

Did you use the "guns" or needles?

All the above. In those days everything wasn't guns. The bicillin was the disposable glass syringes, where you put in a plastic plunger. The GG shots were 2cc's of gamma globulin and we used the regular glass syringes. I was doing duty at the dispensary one weekend and Sunday night there were about eight corpsmen in the dispensary who were doing night duty. We heard the senior chief announce over the loudspeaker, "All corpsmen please report to the duty office." So we all went down there.

By the way, I had already filled out my dream sheet and actually got a cruiser. I think it was in the Atlantic or the Med; I forget which. And that was okay. I kind of wanted to go to sea but I also wanted to do the Marine thing.

The senior chief said, "There's been a request to amend orders for two, three, or four of you, and you're going to go FMF." The other guys didn't want to do that. My best buddy didn't want to but I said to him, "Hey, man. Let's go do this. It sounds pretty neat."

So we volunteered and went to Camp Pendleton–B School–or as I like to call it, the *Reader's Digest* version of Marine Corps boot camp. They ran us around with packs and tried to make Marines out of us. That was in January of '67. Then we went to Vietnam and were assigned units. It turned out that that guy was killed.

Your buddy?

Yes. And I've always felt responsible for that. He didn't want to do it. And I, being 18 or 19, was stupid.

What do you remember about arriving in Vietnam?

We flew to Okinawa and staged at [Camp] Smedley D. Butler for a couple of days. They gave us green uniforms and some more shots. Then they put us back on a Flying Tiger Airlines plane–a DC-8. Of course, the stewardesses at that time, stopped in Okinawa. They wouldn't let them go on to Vietnam. So we got aboard and landed at Danang.

Then they put us in a hut right at the end of the airstrip. These F-4s were constantly taking off with their afterburners. They would rattle your teeth.

The next morning they came with the assignments. Three or four of us got assigned to 2/5. Then they put us aboard a C-130 and we flew to An Hoa, south and west of Danang. As we were landing and got real low, all of a sudden we started taking rounds in the belly. The crew chief looked at us and said, "We're taking rounds. Hold on."

There were no seats so we were sitting on the floor. And we didn't know what the hell that meant. We were still trying to figure out what a fire team was. And the pilot just went for the ground. All of a sudden the plane just dropped like a fast elevator. "Clank, boom, bang," and the plane was bouncing. I can still the faces of some of the guys. There was a corpsman named Graham, a red-headed guy. I could see him saying, "We're screwed." We thought we had crashed. We didn't know what steel-matted runways were. We had no experience and nobody told us we were going to land on steel mat, which is noisy under the best of conditions.

The plane then stopped and the grizzly, old Air Force crew chief looked over and started laughing at us. That was our arrival in An Hoa.

When was that?

May of '67. We went to the battalion aid station. That was before Lou Legarie had arrived. Dr. Viti was there. There was also a chief corpsman who sat us down that night and read us a poem he had written about a corpsman who goes out and gets himself killed. He was so proud of that poem telling us we were all going to get killed, which turned out to be closer to the truth than we knew. We thought, "Oh, God! Welcome to Vietnam." This chief wasn't very popular with us. He was rotated out about 3 months later. Then we were assigned to our companies; I got Hotel.

What kind of other orientation did you get regarding equipment? What did they give you for supplies?

There was no orientation at all–zero. We got a B-1 bag–a Unit 1 bag. They gave us battle dressings and some morphine syrettes, some atropine syrettes, a bandage scissors, which I still have, suture scissors, a suture set, a cut down set, amyl nitrate ampules, which I threw away, and some aspirin. Not much. When we went into the field for the first time, we learned pretty quickly.

How soon after, did you got out on patrol?

That very day. They assigned us in the morning and I was up in the weeds that afternoon.

What do you remember about that first time?

The first couple of times were kind of nondescript. We were down in the Arizona Valley, from what I've read the most heavily booby-trapped area in Vietnam. Militarily, they never kept the corpsmen up to date. We didn't really care. We just followed the guy in front of us and when they yelled, "Corpsman up!" we went. Lucia [Viti] had taught me more about what I did over there than I ever knew. We didn't know where we were going or what the operation was all about or what it was called. They didn't tell us and we didn't ask.

We were down in the Arizona Valley, which was very heavily mined. You couldn't go out on patrol out there without stepping on mines. We were probably about 6 clicks out of An Hoa and had sent out a three-man team to recon across a rice paddy before we assaulted it. They got across fine without taking any fire. The next thing we heard was "Boom, boom." And that was my first casualty. I dropped my pack and ran across this rice paddy. It was Corporal Nelson. The son of a gun had taken his helmet off. Dammit! I still remember it. Even then, I had told them . . . "You guys have to keep your helmets on." I'd lecture them all the time about stuff like that, even when I was the new guy. Well, he had taken his helmet off and got a piece of shrapnel right in the damn forehead and it killed him. If he had his helmet on he would have lived. There was another guy with him who was wounded. Those were my first casualties.

When you get there as a corpsman, you really don't understand because you don't go to advanced infantry training. The boot camp is just basic stuff. It just kind of gets you in shape and gets you to understand the basic Marine organization. And we weren't with a unit. We went over individually and came back individually. We were really disenfranchised from the unit. So we really didn't understand how to operate with a Marine unit. There only was one time we did large unit training. They took us out in this landing craft, ran us out in the water, turned around, dropped the ramp, and played Normandy with a bunch of Marines. Another time the Marines used us as the bad guys in an assault in the middle of the night. So it was awkward for us because we didn't know what to do.

There was a E-5 sergeant who had hit the beaches in '65 with the 1st MARDIV when the first buildup happened. His name was SGT Roy Gibson. He was born in Kansas City, MO, and was a deputy sheriff out in Taos, NM. As soon as I arrived and stepped off the helicopter, he grabbed me by the arm and said, "Doc. You do what I do, exactly what I do, when I do it, nothing more, nothing less, and when I tell you to do something, you do it exactly as I tell you, instantly without question. I'm going to teach you to stay alive." And he did.

I remember one time we were assaulting across a rice paddy and took some sniper fire. I hit the ground and was about 3 inches below the lowest rice plant. I looked up. He was standing in front of me and looked down at me with real disdain on his face. "Doc. What in the fuck are you doing?"

"They're shootin'"

He grabbed me by the shoulder, pulled me up and said, "They can't hit the broad side of a barn. Didn't I tell you to do what I do, when I do it, and don't think about it yourself. Did I fall on the ground? No. Then, dammit, don't fall on the ground." And he taught me to be instinctive, not to think about it but just react. After a while you learned which snipers could hit you and which snipers couldn't.

What made him so sure that sniper was a bad shot?

They were shooting over our heads. You could hear the rounds cracking. Some of those guerrilla snipers couldn't hit a wall 20 feet away. They were very bad. It was probably some farmer that put his black pajamas on and shot at us because the NVA made them do it. Then we

encountered some really good snipers. But you kind of learned. If the first round didn't hit you, you figured those guys couldn't shoot in the first place. The first round was always a surprise and the best shot. If they missed on that shot, which was the shot they could take the most aim with, you pretty well figured they couldn't hit you so you didn't hit the ground. Then the sergeant was killed in November.

He was killed in November?

Yeah, unfortunately. We had gotten hit really, really bad in September. We had gone out on a platoon size patrol. CAPT Bowers was the skipper. He retired a general. We had gone on that patrol with SGT Wadley, SGT Gibson, and SGT [William B.] Stutes. The first squad literally got mowed down.

It was an ambush?

Yes, it was. We were walking across this very small rice paddy. Some of these rice paddies had little islands. There would be a rice paddy around it and a clump of trees in the middle. Not too long before this we had looked across a big rice paddy and saw a bunch of guys about our size with flak jackets and gas masks. We thought they were Marines. We waved at them and they waved back. They went on their way and we went on ours. Well, we ended up walking right in the middle of them. As we walked across this small rice paddy towards a tree line, the NVA hit us. They had a weapons platoon.

So they were NVA you were waving at.

Yes. They were NVA. It wasn't the first time we had face to face contact with them. So we got hit and Stutes was killed with the first shot, Steve Irvin was also killed. About six guys went down dead in the first volley. So Wadley and I ran across the rice paddy. The ground was just exploding all around us. I couldn't hear. There was a huge bomb crater right in front of the tree line so we hid behind it to help the guys but they were already dead.

Then Wadley took a couple of rounds. There was a guy named Crabtree who was our platoon radioman. He got shot in the leg and broke his femur. He was still radioing back to the company. And that's when we had our mighty Mattels, the M16 with the plastic stocks made by Mattel. We had four guys from what they called shore party who had M14s. All the rest of the guys had M16s and every damn one of them jammed.

All the M16s jammed?

Every damn one of them. I don't know if you know this but the very first ones that were issued, the stocks were made by Mattel. So the buttplates had Mattel on them. So here we are and the only firepower we had was four M14s and we're pinned down with a couple of wounded guys behind this rice paddy about 50 feet from the enemy. And they were good. When they shot, they hit.

And 2nd LT [Allan J.]Herman kept running out and sticking his head up. He was one of the new second louies we had just gotten about a month before. He kept sticking his head up and I said, "Lieutenant, they're gonna pop you!" And there he is throwing hand grenades at them. "Lieutenant. You're just gonna piss 'em off. We're not gonna defeat these guys."

And by this time, the platoon had pulled back and left us out there because they didn't have any firepower. And sure enough the NVA plugged him right in the eye and killed him instantly. He was a typical second lieutenant straight out of Quantico–a map in one hand a .45 in

the other. They all came to us like that. We went through so many second louies out of Quantico, I lost track of them. He kept sticking his head up and eventually they got him. A lot of the dead had been shot in the eyeball. Stutes also got it that way and so did Irvin. These NVA were good.

Then Gibson kept running back and forth like a crazy man. I yelled, "Gib. Quit running back and forth; they're gonna kill you!" He and Stutes had gone through boot camp together and were very close buddies. And, of course, Stutes was dead. So I'm lying there with two wounded guys. And, as I found out later, we were the bait for the NVA to kill more Marines. Every time someone tried to come get us they'd plug them.

So, they basically bombed us. We were ground zero for the F-4s and A-4s and the Hueys and the mortars, and the artillery. They did that for most of the day and into the evening.

You were sitting out there for 12 hours with all this firepower coming down on you?

Right on top of us. Napalm and everything. The only thing that protected us was this huge bomb crater that we were on the back side of. When the bomb had gone off it had kicked up dirt that was raised up so we were hidden behind there. And every time we'd stick our heads up they'd take a shot at us. At one point, Wadley leaned over and said, "Pull out your .45, Doc."

Well, I carried a .45. I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with it. I didn't carry any ammo with it, and I never cleaned it. So I pulled this thing out. And I actually had a clip with six rounds in it. I pulled the slide back and it jammed. Wadley then said, "They're gonna overrun us. Get ready." Of course, they didn't overrun us but when one of the NVA guys stuck his head up, I threw my .45 at him. And we spent the rest of the evening being bombed. Every time one of the F-4s or A-4s came in you'd hear this click, click, click, click. That was their signal to go into their holes. After the plane dropped whatever, they'd go click, click. I found out later that they didn't drop anything bigger than 250s because they thought we might still be out there and they didn't want to kill us. Every time one of those bombs went off our bodies came off the ground about 3 or 4 inches. And the napalm was really something. When they dropped the napalm, all the air would go that way, then come back.

How many of you were out there?

There were about half a dozen dead guys, myself, and Wadley. He got plugged twice and I, too had been hit by this time. And then there was Crabtree, the radioman. He was behind us. They had tried to pull him out earlier but he had refused to go because he was trying to direct the air strikes from hitting us. So there were three of us who were still alive. LT Herman was laying right next to me and he was dead.

You say you were also hit?

Yes. I got shrapnel in the shoulder and the back.

But they managed to get you out of there.

Yes. Two or three guys came crawling up and said, "You guys are still alive. Do you want to go back?" I said I thought that would be a good idea. Whatever unit we had run into was the best we ever encountered. They hit everything they shot at.

While you were hiding in the bomb crater, were you able to provide much medical attention to the wounded?

Some. I couldn't move so I threw Crabtree a battle dressing. If you moved you were dead. I yelled at him. I said, "Crabtree, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm shot in the leg and it broke my leg."

I asked him a few questions. "Is it spurting blood or anything like that?"

"No. Nothing like that, just oozing." He put the battle dressing on. Then I put a couple of battle dressings, as best I could, on Wadley. He was hit in the shoulder and chest. He had been Korea. He's retired now and lives in Idaho.

When they finally pulled us out, the NVA were still there. A CH-34 then came in to pick up the wounded guys. I'll never forget this. He had to land in this really tight rice paddy and these '34s were really good sized helicopters. His rotor blades were shattering the tree tops but he got it down. After we got everybody on, I grabbed the crew chief and said, "Tell the pilot to turn this thing around and go out the other way because you're gonna fly right over the top of these guys and they apparently have a couple of heavy machine guns."

The crew chief said that he understood. And sure enough, the pilot took off and headed right across the NVA. The helicopter took fire and a few of the guys in the helicopter were wounded again.

Were you are any other big operations?

We had a couple. And we always had casualties. The biggest operation was in November '67 and we got shellacked. I have a list of all our casualties. We were apparently chasing an NVA division or regiment or whatever the heck it was. They were retreating and there was this huge operation; 2/5 was detached from the 5th Marine Regiment and were working with the Army on this operation. Point battalion was going to be 2/5. And you can almost guess . . . Who's going to be point company? Hotel. Let me guess who is going to be point platoon. Third Platoon.

So we're up in the front of about 3,000 guys and we're chasing this NVA regiment or division. We were airlifted from An Hoa. We ran off the helicopters and into an area with wood, a stream, and a small rice paddy. I was with the mortar platoon towards the back of the company. They crossed the little creek and climbed a steep embankment into a rice paddy and ran into some French concrete bunkers. The NVA and left a holding company to slow us down and they literally mowed us down. In 2 or 3 hours we had lost 36 KIAs. Between KIAs and WIAs, we lost over half the company.

My buddy Gibson got killed. They threw a Chicom grenade in front of him which exploded. After we were pinned down, we got surrounded. The medical situation was really bad because we couldn't get them out. I called in the Army medevacs. Army medevacs, with their Hueys, would tend to be a bit more daring. I don't think it was the Marine pilots as I learned later. It was the fact that the Marines didn't have as many helicopters and they were ordered not to get shot down. When the Army Hueys came in they got shot to pieces. I can still see the plexiglass windows blown out.

So we had to hold the wounded back and a bunch of them died in the middle of the night. We were already surrounded and they were shooting at us all night long. Then someone called in "Spooky" and he took care of them. By morning they were gone. But we had lost about three dozen dead and I don't how many wounded.

You must have felt pretty helpless not being able to do very much.

I helped them die. That was probably one of the saddest things. Here we were, 19 or 20, and we're making decisions as to who lives or dies. We'd learn that we were going to get two more Hueys in and that was it. So pick out six guys. And you knew that these guys over here probably wouldn't make it even if you got them to Charlie Med. These guys over here might make it. And these guys would definitely make it. So you put the guys you knew were going to make it on the helicopter. And the rest of them just died. I remember that night there was a 19-year-old black kid and I held him. He was bleeding through the mouth into the nose. He had gotten a chest wound with no exit and you can imagine what that does. He was still alive and conscious and I sat there and held him as he was bleeding all over me. He talked about his mother, his girlfriend, his family–all this kind of stuff. He knew he was dying. And I eventually fell asleep about 2 in the morning. When I woke up, he was dead. I always felt I had let him down because I wasn't there when he died.

Eventually, they pulled us out of there. That was probably the worst I've ever seen. And then in December, they pulled me out of the company.

Where did they send you after that?

A battalion aid station back in An Hoa. If you survived as a corpsman in the field, they pulled you back to the aid station.

What was it like in the aid station?

Boring. But you didn't get shot at as much. They'd bring us casualties. We were the first line for casualties. When we got overwhelmed, they'd send them to Danang or the *Sanctuary* or wherever. We did basically meatball surgery.

When you say meatball surgery, you mean . . .

Patch 'em up, stabilize 'em, and ship 'em out to a better facility like Danang or one of the hospital ships. We didn't have the equipment to treat the very seriously wounded–amputees, head wounds, chest wounds.

This would have been late '67 and early '68.

Yes. I went back to the aid station somewhere in December of '67.

Were you there for Tet?

Yes. They pulled us out and we went to Phu Bai and I was in the aid station there during Tet. Hotel Company went to Hué under CAPT [Ron] Christmas.

You must have had a lot of business during that period.

We did. We didn't really treat a lot of casualties there. We were mainly a clearing center for the documentation and so forth. They had hospital ships offshore and instead of bringing them to us, they just took them out there or to Danang. We did, however, add details to a lot of records. Things like: "29 February 1968. Killed in action this date. Quang Tri Province. Operation Hué City. Killed by hostile fire."

They actually stood the battalion down after that because it had taken so many casualties that it was no longer effective as a fighting force. So we were then checking in the 18-year-old kids. The guys who had turned 18 the day before on Okinawa, the next day they were in

Vietnam. They couldn't be put into a war zone until they were 18. And that's what I did the rest of my time.

Many of the FMF corpsmen I've talked to told me they felt they had to earn their way with the Marines once they arrived in Vietnam. Did you find that to be true?

Yup. It's like any FNGs. You had to earn your wings. And that was a direct result of going over not as part of a unit but as individuals. You were not judged as a unit but as an individual. And that's the disenfranchisement I was talking about. And that's probably the sorriest issue with Vietnam veterans. We were totally disenfranchised.

In the sense that you felt you didn't belong to anybody?

Correct. I knew I had to take care of them and I did. I did the best I could at that age. Sometimes you were like their mother. They'd come and talk to you at night about this and that– about their girlfriends who jilted them, or they were pissed at their wives, etc.

So you were also a chaplain, too.

Yeah, you really were. You'd sit there at night in bunkers or on hilltops or in rice paddies, and they'd flop down and start talking about this different stuff. They wanted to know what you thought about them staying in the Corps or getting out, career counseling and marriage counseling–all kinds of stuff. I remember going to Danang for R&R for a few days. We were in a bar and a bunch of Army guys were giving a bunch of us corpsmen a bunch of shit about something. It was typical service rivalry. About six Marines came up to the table and said, "Hey, Doc, have you got a problem here?" I didn't even know who these Marines were. I looked up at the Army guys and they said, "No problem," and they left.

So they took care of their doc. You took care of them and they took care of you.

And taking care of them was more than just bandaging them. I hounded them about salt tablets and their malaria pills and changing their socks. Every time we stopped on patrol, I made those guys take their boots off and dry their socks on their packs and change socks. They didn't want to do that. They felt that if they got jungle rot on their feet, that was their easy ticket home. But I told them they could lose toes and that could be a permanent thing. At the end of the day, like kids, they kind of appreciated that.

I remember Gibson. He had been in country for so long. He and I used to sit on the river banks down by the coal mine and go swimming. We'd throw hand grenades in the water to kill the fish so the locals could have some fish. I was sitting down there with Stutes and Gibson and I said, "Why are you guys still here? You came ashore in '65." This was in '67. I said, "When are you going home?"

They said, "When the war is over. It's our duty to be here." So on September 11th, the day after Stutes was killed, Gibson kind of went nuts. I filled him up with Thorazine. I made him into a basket case and I tagged him. I put on the tag, "Return to CONUS." This man has been in Vietnam for 2 ½ years and had no business coming back.

They sent him to Japan with that tag and Japan sent him back to the States. And I'll be damned. That son of a gun showed back up again in late October. I said, "Gib, what the hell are you doin' back here?"

"The war ain't over yet." And on November the 6th he was killed.

And Steve Irvin, a Missouri boy like me, was a hell of a shot. We were on patrol. It was almost like a Monty Python skit. We were walking around some of these islands I was telling you about, the ones in the middle of rice paddies. This one had a tall hedge about 6-foot tall around it. There was an entrance on one side and an entrance on the other side in the middle of this ville. We're walking on patrol and I'm in front of Steve. We walk through this ville and are going out the hedgerow on the other side. As soon as I got to the opening in the hedgerow, this little, old Vietnamese lady--beetle nut teeth and all this stuff--had a rope in her hand. She must have gotten scared or something because she looked at me, handed me the rope, and ran away like crazy. So I'm holding this rope and standing on the inside of this hedge and I don't know what's on the end of the rope. So I pull the rope and there was a water buffalo on the other end and he wasn't really in a really good mood. It ran out in the rice paddy and by this time I had stepped outside the hedge. He put his head down and charged. It was like the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. That damn thing was coming at me full speed. He was a huge mound of buffalo with horns and stuff. Steve, who was behind me, yelled, "Get down, Doc!"

So I hit the ground and one shot rang out. Now these water buffaloes were hard to kill because we had had problems with them before and I had seen guys put 20 rounds in them before they'd go down. Steve caught this thing right between the eyes and it dropped about 10 feet right in front of me. So I have a picture of me sitting on top of this buffalo holding its horns like I was a big African hunter.

Of course, the lady got mad.

That was probably her beast of burden.

Yeah. We had a civil action team that came out and debriefed us. They told us the animal was like a tractor and we shouldn't have done that. Anyway, they ended up buying her another water buffalo. Then Steve was killed in September. That was a sad day.

When did you leave Vietnam?

Mid May of '68.

You obviously had feelings about getting there. What do you remember about leaving?

It was the damndest thing. Here I was in this environment and they put me in a helicopter and flew me to Danang, where they gave me a new set of utilities. The next thing I did was walk up the steps to this giant airplane with its engines running. And at the top of the steps. . . I still remember this. I was standing at the top of the steps and turned around. Then I looked in front of me. It was like a time portal you've seen in science fiction movies where they go through a time portal and half of them is still here and the other half is 10,000 light years away. It was surreal. I'm hot, sweaty, dirty, getting shot at and all of a sudden I walk through this time portal into an air conditioned airplane where the crew couldn't do enough for me. All my buddies are out in the field someplace getting shot at and killed and I'm going aboard this air conditioned airplane to go home.

We went to Okinawa to pick up the stewardesses. They fed us and gave us as much as we wanted. The pilots came back and thanked us. One day I'm being shot at and the next day I've got all these people trying to get me drunk. It was the damndest feeling I've ever had in my life or probably will ever have.

What was the homecoming like?

It sucked big time.

Did you go to Travis?

We flew to Okinawa back to Smedley D. Butler, got new uniforms, cleaned up, and flew back on Flying Tiger Airlines to El Toro. Every person on that plane, except for a few lifers, had gotten civilian clothes in a package from home.

So we got to El Toro, went through a customs kind of thing. We put our sea bags up on a big table and the sergeant said, "Doc, do you have anything I need to worry about?"

I said, "No, sergeant." And he waved me through.

Then we went to the head and put on our civilian clothes. But to look at us, we still had mud oozing out of our pores and tiny pieces of shrapnel coming out of our bodies everywhere, pimples and rashes. So you could tell where we had come from. Then they put us on a bus to go to LAX or San Diego–I can't remember which. And when we hit the gates, there were all these peaceniks with signs saying "Baby Killer." They were throwing tomatoes at the bus and so that was our welcome home.

Then I flew to St. Louis and my fiancee at the time met me, handed me the ring, and said, "It's over." And she took off.

She met you and handed you the ring?

Yeah. She said, "Here's your ring back. I don't want to get married." And that was the end of that relationship. At the time it was awful but it was for the best. I met my wife shortly after. We have been together for 36 years.

And then, of course, I was carrying a sea bag and had people spit at me. It was like, "You're a baby killer. You were in Vietnam, weren't you?" Even though we had civilian clothes on, it was pretty damn obvious. And at that time, you might be wearing civilian clothes but you always wore military shoes. They could tell by the shoes. It was awful.

The next day I went to see one of my good buddies from high school. We were standing outside his house. Then all of a sudden there was a thunderstorm and I hit the ground. And hit it hard. Thirty-six hours before they were shooting at me. Now I'm in South St. Louis talking to one of my buddies. And everybody on that front porch was laughing at me.

That night I went to a party and must have been asked 12 times how many babies had I killed. To this day, I have not gone back to see any of my high school friends. I have never gone to a reunion and never will. My story is very typical.

How was your reunion with your family? Did they ask you about your experiences?

No. We were a military family. My dad had been in the military for about 10 years. And all my uncles had been in the military and been in World War II.

And that's an interesting story. I had actually "escaped" from Vietnam in July or August of '67. They had given me R&R. I had two choices–Bangkok for 7 days or Honolulu for 10 days. So I went to Honolulu and just bought a ticket and flew home. Of course, the orders had stipulated that you couldn't leave the Hawaiian Islands. So I was basically AWOL. I had a friend who was a TWA ticket agent. So I called her and said, "I need a ticket to go home."

So she called a ticket agent and got me a cheap ticket. So I got on an airplane and flew back to St. Louis. So I went home on R&R. I never told anybody I did that.

When I got home, I took my dad aside and gave him a Purple Heart. "In case something happens, I want you to have this. But don't tell Mom." Of course, he knew what it was and he kept it for me until I came home. And he never told my mother. She never knew.

My intention was to go back and I did. The day I was supposed to go back, I flew to San Francisco, went on to Hawaii, and reported back in. I had a real "I don't give a shit" attitude. What were they going to do to me, send me to Vietnam?

By that time, I had already figured out that the war sucked. But in my family, when you take a responsibility and commitment, you fulfill it. No matter what it is, you fulfill it. It is a very patriotic family. Not going back just wasn't discussed.

When did you get out of the Navy?

I got out in December of '69. I came back and got a duty station at Fallon, Nevada, which at the time was an auxiliary air station. I was on the crash crew and drove the ambulance. Then I got a duty station swap. A corpsman who was at Bethesda and lived in Fallon, wanted to get a duty station in Fallon. So I swapped duty stations with this guy and went to Bethesda Naval Hospital.

In November of '69 I went on leave to go deer hunting with my father. My best buddy's girlfriend had a girlfriend so he asked me if I wanted a blind date. One of the blind dates he had fixed me up with earlier was a girl from the country and it was the first time she had been in the city. And she was looking at the buildings and saying, "Golly. These buildings would hold a lot of hay." So I said to my friend, no thanks. I'm goin' huntin'.

So I went hunting for about 7 days and got bored. Then I said, "Okay, let's go out." And so the third week in November of '69, I met my wife and married her 8 weeks later.

I was going to stay in. I liked the military, believe it or not. I didn't like the Vietnam part but I loved the Marines. When I came back to the Navy, it was all Mickey Mouse crap. When I was in the field, we had access to Thorazine, penicillin. Any drug I needed I could get. And I studied so I knew how to use these drugs. I talked to the doctors. So I came back to the Navy and I'm in the dispensary giving out aspirin. And the next morning the duty nurse comes in and reams you out for giving aspirin without a doctor's orders. So I got in more trouble with these nurses telling me what I couldn't do.

I remember one time we had a patient we gave a penicillin shot to and he went into anaphylactic shock like that. A couple of us had been back from Vietnam and we threw oxygen on him and hit him with epinephrine. And the nurse went ballistic. She went nuts. "You've got to wait for the doctor!" Well the doctor wasn't in the dispensary. Finally, after we had stabilized him, the doctor showed up. He turned to the nurse and said, "Commander, shut up and get out of here."

When I was at Bethesda, I was in charge of the detail desk. My job was to detail out all the new arrival corpsmen, E-5 and below. That was a pretty good job. I got to meet President Johnson and President Nixon, Vice President Humphrey, the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

I was going to stay in and had my reenlistment talk with the senior chief. He said, "Okay, what do you want to do?"

"I want subs. I'm tired of getting shot at. I want to go out on the water. I want Independent Duty School." That was a 2-year school at the time. And then I wanted sub school. I was also going to college at the time in Washington taking one or two courses in the evening. I wanted to go through and become an MSC officer and stay in.

He said, "Okay. I'll check it out."

He came back in a couple of days and said he could guarantee me sub school and independent duty school but I would first have to go on sea duty again. So being a wise ass, I said, "Senior Chief, I guess I'm going to an aircraft carrier or a cruiser."

"8404, man. You're going back to the Green Machine."

I said, "Check me out."

They were going to send you back to Vietnam?

Yes. As an E-5 company corpsman.

What a deal! What a deal! So I guess that pretty much made up your mind pretty quick.

Another one of the guys I served with was smarter than I was. He switched over to the Air Force, became a PA, and retired as a full bird in their version of the Medical Service Corps. That was pretty smart. If I had thought about it, I would have done it, too.

What did you do after you got out of the Navy?

I got married in January and then we moved to Columbia, Missouri, where I was enrolled in the University of Missouri. I went into pre-law. I was on the GI Bill and wasn't working. I was doing a lot of fishin' and huntin'. I studied and got pretty good grades.

We made the mistake of moving across the street from the airport. It was a small civilian field. And I've always loved airplanes. So I started flying and became a commercial pilot for a while.

You became a commercial pilot?

Yes. Small planes. This was 1971-1972 time frame. What could I do? For the good jobs, you were getting all these jet jockies coming out of the military and all the airlines were hiring those guys. I hadn't finished all my training. You had to go through all kinds of training in terms of instrument and weather flying. There are different levels of licenses and I was at the lower level license. I talked to my instructor, who was a helluva pilot. I said, "What the heck are you doing teaching these single engine and small twins?"

He said, "I can't get a job." He was in the military but was never a military pilot. "I compete with these guys coming out of Vietnam who've flown F-4s, C-130s, C-123s, Caribous, whatever, and can't get a job."

So I figured this was not a good career so I went back to school full-time. My wife's grandfather knew the chairman of a bank and he got me a job as a clerk in the bank. I went to school and got a bachelors and two masters. And I've been in banking ever since.

What do you do now?

I'm a vice president and manage international trade services at a major regional bank.

What bank?

M&T Bank. Manufacturers and Traders Trust Company is the official name. We're a Buffalo based bank but the international group is headquartered here [Baltimore]. We're one of the top 20 international banks in the country. So that's what I've been doing. I'm also a part-time professor, and I'm a licensed Coast Guard ship's master. I like to keep busy.

It's been over 35 years since you were in Vietnam. Do you think about it much any more?

Constantly. And more as I get older. I've avoided interviews like this. I'm very active in the Vietnam Veterans of America. I'm the treasurer of the largest chapter in the country. Lucia [Viti] sent me an email and said who she was, Dr. Viti's daughter. And because of that I'm talking to you. Otherwise I wouldn't talk to you. And I was even hesitant to do that. Then she told me you were the chief historian for the Medical Department and said that maybe this was something that he could write up and pass on to the next generation of corpsmen. And then I met you.

That's right. You guys have never had an opportunity to tell your side of the story.

No. Well, the first 10 or 12 years I was mad at the world. I was so damn mad at everybody. Not mad in a physical sense but just mad emotionally. I didn't tell anybody that I was in Vietnam–nobody. Of course, my wife and her family knew but that's about it. My closest friends didn't know I was a Vietnam veteran. I absolutely refused to tell them. Not that I was ashamed of anything. I just didn't want to deal with the crap.

Banks are highly regulated and one of the things we used to have to do is to file a report every year to the federal government to show how many minorities you have. Vietnam veterans are considered a minority. So you fill out these cards and write down: Are you Hispanic, African-American, Vietnam veteran, or whatever? Every year the card came to me and I'd check no and sent it back down to the HR director. As I was filling that card out, somebody came running in and said that the *Challenger* had blown up. And I thought about that. And I thought that if a schoolteacher could go up in space and get herself blown up, I could tell the bank that I'm a Vietnam veteran. So I did. I checked the box.

When the card got down there, the HR director called me. "Dennis, I didn't know." And that's when I came out of the closet. Up until that point, nobody knew. People I worked with, people we went to dinner with, nobody knew.

Did anything change once you came out of the closet?

Yes. People wanted to talk more about it. It was a good thing but not a good thing. Talking about it made me have more flashbacks. But in the end I think it's probably a good thing because we've got to get our stories out.

What happened was, all of a sudden we became popular. I can't tell you how many people came up to me at a party or something. "I wanted to go to Vietnam, too. But I have flat feet." You want to punch them in the face. Don't give me this flat feet story. You were hiding under a rock somewhere, buddy.

It was very strange. For a while we were hated, then they were indifferent to us, then we got really, really popular. Now, I think, we're more mainstreamed. I'm the vice commander of my veterans' unit honor guard. We do the NFL games in Baltimore and have been doing so since '96. We do the pre-game ceremonies and always have the active duty guys with us. We sit on the field on the sideline and we were all there watching the game. This was opening day for the Ravens. Three Air Force guys–a major, a colonel, and a sergeant who had just gotten back from Iraq--came up to me and said, "Thank you."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Thank you." They were being honored that night at the game and people were all over them, and so forth. I said, "What are you thanking me for?"

He said, "No. It's you. It's what you've done. You guys got the shaft and I want to thank you for your service and thank you for teaching the public that we're worth something. Because of you we're being honored."

I said, "If that is our legacy, then that is a damn good legacy, isn't it?" Talk about heavy stuff.

Have you found that, since the Iraq war started, you're been having more flashbacks?

You're not kidding. Especially when they show the bombings. Boy, does that take me back. We had a lot of that. I don't know what our percentages were in terms of gunshot wounds versus mines and booby traps but the bombs and booby traps accounted for a high percentage. We were constantly hearing explosions, especially when we were on a large company size patrol. When I hear Hueys, boy. I used to be a long-distance bicycle racer and out in the middle of nowhere. And Hueys would come right over the top of us. I had to stop and get off my bike and sit on the ground shaking. I find myself doing that again. We still have a unit here that's a medevac unit and they're still flying Hueys.

Well, Dennis, I want to tell you how much I appreciate you taking the time talking to me. It's a privilege.

I hope I didn't ramble too much.

No. You didn't ramble at all. Everything you said was worth saying. I will make a transcript and send it to you. Dennis, thanks so much. I really appreciate this.

You're very welcome.

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